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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRASILIA 000707

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BRAZILIAN GENERAL BREAKS RANKS ON INDIGENOUS
POLICY AMID PROTESTS IN RORAIMA REGION

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BRASILIA 00000707 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mission Phillip Chicola for reasons
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Summary

1. (C) Brazilian Army General Augusto Heleno, military commander of the Amazon region, spoke out on April 16 against the GOB's indigenous policy calling it "chaotic," specifically in reference to a traditionally indigenous area in northern Roraima state planned to become a protected reserve. This challenge came after Brazil's Supreme Court stopped federal action to forcibly remove rice farmers from the just demarcated indigenous territory. Both the Supreme Court decision and the Army general's statements would seem to impede settling the final status of this enormous land area. Further complicating the issue are Brazilian concerns, fueled by fears of rising prices because of the widely reported on "world food crisis," about the levels of its rice production and plans for "rationing" its harvest. However, President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva and Brazil's Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI) President Marcio Meiro say that the demarcation will go forward. Heleno's security concerns appear overblown, and resolving the Raposa Serra do Sol dispute in favor of Brazil's indigenous would send a strong message to those who manipulate the demarcation process for their own ends. Demarcation falls short, however, of what Brazil's indigenous need: assistance in developing the capacity to manage their land, develop it sustainably, and relate with the outside world by means of government-provided infrastructure.

Supreme Court Interferes, Again

2. (SBU) Following an urgent appeal from Roraima's Governor Jose de Anchieta Filho to stop Federal Police from forcibly removing rice farmers from reservation lands, Brazil's Supreme Court ruled that the removals should stop because the final demarcation "could put at risk national integrity and sovereignty." The governor called the Court's decision a victory for the people of Roraima in the wake of what reports from Roraima had described as protests akin to a civil war

against forced removals of non-indigenous from the area. However, Justice Minister Tarso Genro later criticized the press coverage as unfairly slanted in favor of the rice farmers. Although obstructionist, setting fires and blocking federal authorities passage to the reserves, the protesters numbered only about 150 people.

¶3. (SBU) The Supreme Court has made similar rulings in the past, generally on the side of land and agricultural development versus indigenous demarcation of land. In 2005 Federal Police forcibly removed 400 members of the Guarani-Kaiowa tribe from land in Mato Grosso do Sul state, notorious for indigenous killings, after the Supreme Court issued an injunction preventing the land from becoming fully demarcated. These cases have raised concerns about the politicization of demarcation, especially when the wealthy landowners usually get the upper-hand.

The Middle of Nowhere

¶4. (U) The disputed territory Raposa Serra do Sol, located on the border with Venezuela and Guyana in Brazil's isolated northern state of Roraima, covers 1.7 million hectares, about the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. The military is one of the few federal government entities whose personnel regularly visit the region, and they do so because of the military's national security mandate and border control responsibilities. The inhabitants of the region are almost exclusively indigenous, except for agricultural workers on a few large rice farms. The indigenous peoples there, numbering approximately 18,000 persons, are from the Macuxi, Ingarico, Uapixana, Patamona, and Taurepangue tribes. This final stage of demarcation took almost 30 years to accomplish, including numerous studies and congressional

BRASILIA 00000707 002.2 OF 003

approval. The region has little to no development except for a few large rice farms, although it is rich in natural forest lands and crisscrossed by rivers, giving the area significant biodiversity. To make room for the rice farms, thousands of hectares of native grasslands were cleared.

General's remarks (reftel)

¶5. (C) Augusto Heleno, a four-star army general, spoke out during a seminar in Rio de Janeiro to military authorities, criticizing the final demarcation of the Raposa Serra do Sol indigenous reserve. The seminar, titled "Brazil, Threats to its Sovereignty," took place in the Military Club in front of an estimated 150 active and retired military officers. Heleno said, "The indigenous policy is disassociated from Brazilian history and must be urgently reviewed. I'm not against the government organs in the area; I want to associate myself with reversing a failed policy -- just go there to see what is lamentable, not to mention chaotic." This was met with applause from the audience. He also defended the army's independence from the government noting, "The Army High Command is an organization that serves the Brazilian state, not the government." (Comment: Heleno's words are not as provocative in the Brazilian context as they might appear. They are backed by historical precedent, as the Brazilian military has been in a position to intervene when civilian government fails, and its authority to do so was written into the previous constitution. Moreover, the Brazilian military apparatus is not accustomed to strong civilian leadership since democracy was re-established in 1985. The Defense Ministry itself dates only to 1999, and Nelson Jobim, appointed minister of defense in 2007, has been unusually active in managing the military services. End Comment.)

¶6. (U) Heleno indicated particular frustration over the GOB's agreement to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (DRIP) because of the provisions for demilitarization of indigenous reserves and the nebulous terms that some argue grant indigenous peoples direct and sovereign control of

their lands. Heleno said that he had no political or economic agenda, but rather primarily an interest in national security because the territory's demarcation, coupled with the potential indigenous perception that DRIP makes indigenous territory inviolable by the military even in times of national emergency, might expose this sensitive border territory to threats. Finally, Heleno said that, based on his experience with the indigenous, after land demarcation the indigenous do nothing to develop their lands, specifically with regard to necessary infrastructure for providing food, education, and health. (Comment: The demarcation of indigenous lands also runs counter to a common Brazilian notion that the appropriate way to "deal" with minorities, racial and ethnic, is through cultural assimilation with more developed society. Heleno's perspective challenges government policy as it is implemented, as the GOB only provides the indigenous with land, not taking into account the need for the capacity to manage it, develop it sustainably, and relate with the outside world -- most notably with government infrastructure. Of course, both the standard GOB and Heleno's perspectives fail to take into account what the indigenous themselves want and are able to do with the resources at their disposal. End Comment.)

FUNAI President Rebuts

16. (SBU) Heleno is a highly-regarded officer in the Brazilian military, and although there was a great deal of media attention to his remarks, including a summons from President Lula to Minister Jobim and Army Commander General Enzo Martins Peri to have them explain this public criticism, the popular general was simply asked not to discuss the matter publicly. However, during a newspaper interview FUNAI President Meira, in a veiled reference to Heleno's remarks, said that a conservative backlash of prejudice is returning against the indigenous. He asserted that cultural

BRASILIA 00000707 003.2 OF 003

assimilation is a 19th Century concept, and argued that the indigenous pose no security threat, noting the close and historical relationship between the Army and the indigenous. The military was the first to make contact with the indigenous in the rough, outlying regions of the Amazon, and currently over half of the military personnel in the border area are indigenous. Meira also said that the Army's presence on the border is a constitutional obligation, indigenous territories have always been open to the Armed Forces, and the indigenous peoples have not impeded the military's access to them, adding that all indigenous land is the property of the Federal Union. When asked about the land titles that the rice farmers demonstrate, Meira asserted that these land documents were obtained illegally and mean nothing, saying that all of the farmers in the area are invaders of indigenous land.

Much Ado about Six Rice Farms

17. (SBU) The future of several thousand hectares of rice plantations is in question, but the reality is that only six "landowners" are affected. Landowners exert strong influence on Brazilian decision-makers, including members of congress, and often affect GOB policy. In this case, however, it seems that the Lula administration is behind the indigenous. President Lula has stated publicly that he will work to overturn the Supreme Court's injunction to keep Federal Police from forcibly removing the rice farmers, and his commitment seems to have the support of his cabinet, most notably the Human Rights Minister, the Justice Minister, and the Environmental Minister. Although GOB efforts to protect Brazil's "limited" rice supply have complicated the effort to remove the rice farmers, it seems unlikely that these illegal Roraima rice growers could contribute much to overall production levels given their isolation from reliable logistics points that would allow them to sell their product economically.

Comment

18. (C) Both Heleno and Meira are sincere in their concerns about the final disposition of the Raposa Serra do Sol territory. Meira believes that demarcation is important to protect the indigenous communities living in the territory and although mandated by Brazil's 1988 constitution, final demarcation has been repeatedly delayed and obstructed by powerful political and commercial interests. Heleno is also sincere in his security concerns. However, it is difficult to see his concerns as legitimately aimed at the indigenous or GOB indigenous policy, in light of the minimal military presence currently serving in the Amazon -- approximately 24,000 troops cover an area the size of half the United States (including Alaska). However, Heleno is correct that simply leaving indigenous in a vast open territory without proper access to government infrastructure to meet basic needs as Brazilian citizens is also not appropriate. Living conditions for many of Brazil's indigenous are dire, and the GOB needs to go beyond providing land and find ways both to provide for the basic needs of its indigenous citizens and to protect their important cultural heritage. Resolving the Raposa Serra do Sol dispute in favor of Brazil's indigenous would set a precedent and send a strong message to the powerful wealthy who manipulate the demarcation process for their own ends. But even if the land is finally demarcated, the government would be mistaken to think that it has fulfilled its responsibility to the indigenous on the Raposa Serra do Sol Reserve.

CHICOLA